

A letter on “The life and career of actor Corin Redgrave”

17 April 2010

The following letter was sent in response to the appreciation of British actor Corin Redgrave published by the World Socialist Web Site on April 12. (See: “Joined Trotskyist movement in early 1970s: The life and career of actor Corin Redgrave.”)

Comrades,

I thought the recent Corin Redgrave obituary by David Walsh and David North was powerful, evocative and insightful.

The obituary deals with his death both objectively and sensitively, to the extent that I found it very moving. This is hardly surprising since it deals with an extraordinary time in history that all of us of a certain age journeyed through together. We cut our political teeth during that period, and as the obituary makes clear, there were real elements of tragedy involved in the political crisis that engulfed Redgrave and the entire SLL/WRP in the 1970s, as well as critical lessons to be learnt. It’s been said on a number of occasions that it’s not a matter “whether to laugh or cry, but to understand.” The article achieves this extremely well.

If I had to pick out one particularly insightful paragraph amongst many it contains, it would be: “The conception that artistic activity and revolutionary politics are mutually exclusive, which was not the official policy of the SLL but in practice determined the choices made by a number of its artist-intellectual members, is false. Especially in the case of someone like Redgrave, for whom acting was ‘in the blood,’ such a move had harmful, even debilitating consequences.”

This is absolutely true. How the revolutionary movement assimilates the artistic/intellectual layers who come forward to join the movement is a hugely important question. The conception of mutual exclusivity had not always been the case within the SLL, but the WRP leadership’s increasing adoption of this outlook was to impact negatively on the party on various levels.

I joined the WRP’s forerunner about the same time as Corin in the early 1970s. I didn’t know him very well, but for a few years I had a close political relationship with two other artist/intellectuals within the leadership—the director Roy Battersby and script writer Roger Smith. This was the result of our membership in both the SLL/WRP and the ACTT union.

I worked at the Kodak factory in Harrow, and together with local comrades we began building a party branch. Roy and Roger threw themselves into this work with a great deal of enthusiasm. I remember that Roy did a series of public lectures on *Dialectics of Nature* and Roger gave a number of party branch classes on *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, while both did the odd paper sale at the factory gates. They were very good at explaining complex ideas and making them easier to understand.

These lectures and classes were extremely important, as they took

the discussion away from the immediate problems in the factory and union to address questions of theory, history and science. These were popular among the members, as were the issues surrounding important international developments in Chile, Ireland and Portugal.

The inside of the factory was like a pressure cooker. The management and union bureaucracy were combining to try and victimise the Trotskyists. The majority of workers, while sympathetic, saw no real need for a revolutionary party when it appeared they could bring down governments simply through their trade union strength alone.

I got on with both of these comrades very well and greatly admired them. I looked forward to the ACTT faction meetings held at either Rogers’s house in St. Johns Wood or Roy’s flat in Maida Vale. Among those also present would be Tom Scott Robson, Peter Cox, Ken Trodd, Ken Loach and many others, including a young actor now writing a regular column for the WSWs.

Healy would also make an appearance now and again. It was incredibly exciting and instructive company for a young factory worker to be in. Not only politically, but because after the political agenda had been completed, the discussions often turned into what for me were eye-opening intellectual and cultural barnstorming sessions.

Although they came from university backgrounds and somewhat “glamorous” careers, they had no trouble connecting with the Kodak branch members. Their commitment to the working class and the socialist revolutionary cause was so obviously genuine.

They made no compromises with backwardness and were not in any way condescending like the radical groups are towards workers. Apart from directly political issues, the insights they brought into our discussions from the artistic experiences they had made while directing and writing not only deepened my political understanding enormously but broadened my knowledge about life in general. Quite apart from any other considerations, all of this acted as a pleasant and instructive diversion from our lives on the Kodak production lines.

I believe this worked both ways, because these intellectually sensitive comrades were able to absorb new insights through their closer collaboration with a production branch, which they then utilised in their artistic work. At the time, Roy was working on *Leeds United*—a television drama based on the women’s clothing strike in Leeds. It was a great and proud day for the Kodak branch when Roy invited us down to see the early “rushes” at the BBC television centre in Shepherds Bush. As the security barriers swung open, half-a-dozen of us marched through the forecourt down into the bowels of its stage and studio complex.

In Britain, the working class had just brought down the Heath government. Nationalisation of the film industry was the official policy of the ACTT as a result of the struggle our party had carried out within the union, and now we had the privilege of viewing as yet

unseen footage of a film soon to be seen by millions—a film that would expose the role of the Stalinists in this important strike. I remember thinking how great it was to be alive!

The play aired in October 1974, and, in my opinion, not only represented the best of the famous BBC *Wednesday Play* series of dramas, but also the best work Roy Battersby has ever done. The combined influences of his artistic skills, Marxist political training and the effort to theoretically educate workers who were themselves in struggle was bringing his artistic and dramatic work towards its full potential.

Although Roy was to make the party documentary about Leon Trotsky's last exile at Coyocan in Mexico, where the great revolutionary was murdered by the Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader, his artistic contribution seemed to end when Healy made him "caretaker" of the party school in Derbyshire. In hindsight, this was a ludicrous decision, and one which seems to have signalled the beginning of the undermining of artists and intellectuals within the party. From then on, it appears that their artistic work was discouraged while they were transformed into nothing more than party functionaries.

Worse still, instead of using the artist/intellectuals to raise the cultural level throughout the movement, as he had courageously sought to do in the past, Healy began to use those comrades like Corin and Bob Archer as internal party punch-bags, literally. It helped him create a smoke screen for his own ever more right-wing political trajectory. But in fact these antics—condoned and justified by Banda and Slaughter—encouraged every backward anti-intellectual sentiment within the working class cadre.

This had a fantastically politically debilitating effect on the party, by demoralising both those being publicly humiliated as well as those members forced to witness it. How long could workers have confidence in a party whose intellectual leaders were apparently so incompetent and cowardly?

To his shame, Healy knew he was playing on the deep-seated suspicions of workers towards middle-class intellectuals. But, as the obituary points out, these weren't middle-class forces hostile to the working class, but artists and intellectuals who had made sacrifices to join the international proletarian movement and help create a socialist future.

Healy's attack upon them was a further indication that he was retreating from his decades-long struggle to train Marxists, and instead adapting to the national milieu. There is a virulently strong anti-intellectual tradition in Britain that has to be consciously and continuously fought by the revolutionary leadership and its cadres.

By the early 1980s, the whole of the WRP was in crisis, and Central Committee members in London were being sent out into the regions in an attempt to put out the fires. Corin was ordered to both the Yorkshire and the North East regions. But the deepening crisis in these areas seems to have only compounded his political crisis, and vice versa. Furthermore, Battersby and a number of others left the movement at this time. The last time I spoke to him was on a march in Liverpool in 1981, and he had become a thoroughly bitter and cynical man.

The flight of this layer out of the movement must have intensified the feeling of isolation for the Redgraves enormously, particularly Corin. I had slightly more to do with him at this time, due to the fact that I was sent to follow him into the Yorkshire area, which had collapsed.

A man who was naturally shy became increasingly withdrawn, to

the point of becoming monosyllabic—incredible, considering his profession as an actor. I did think at the time this might be a form of arrogance, but now understand it was probably more a combination of shyness and self-consciousness mixed with a loss of confidence and real confusion over his own role as well as that of artist/intellectuals within the revolutionary movement. The first two can be put down as personality traits, but Healy himself bears responsibility for the last two.

Therefore, while it's somewhat ironic, it's perhaps not so surprising that Corin and sister Vanessa defended Healy politically against the criticisms made by the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985. In the decade before the split, Healy had increasingly encouraged a national standpoint and an orientation towards the labour and Stalinist bureaucracy in Britain.

After the split with the ICFI, Healy and the Redgraves continued this orientation by orientating their "Marxist Party" towards the Stalinist capitalist-restorationist wing around Gorbachev and Perestroika. Since Healy's death, they have championed various middle-class *cause-celebres*. They have organised support campaigns for the British Guantanamo detainees. Vanessa has supported various UN bodies such as UNICEF, and Corin co-founded the "Peace and Progress Party," which stood three candidates in the 2005 General Election. All of which seemed to be aimed at encouraging the idea there is some form of left-liberal democratic wing of British imperialism. Given her performance at the BAFTAs [British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards ceremony], Vanessa Redgrave has now convinced herself that this tendency includes none other than the British royal house of Windsor, heirs to the bloodiest aristocratic line in history.

Although I would not wish to exaggerate, I do believe the loss of this extraordinary intellectual talent from the revolutionary movement in the early 1980s is an important contributory factor to the very low cultural level we see in the British working class today, when taken along with the treacherous role of the Labour Party, Stalinists and trade union bureaucracy. However, this is not a point we need to dwell on too long.

The global capitalist system is spiralling out of control and a new revolutionary tsunami is about to break out upon the world with even greater ferocity than the one witnessed in the early 1970s. It's inconceivable that this won't bring a whole new generation of artists and intellectuals towards, and into, the international proletarian revolutionary movement. That's why all the lessons of that earlier period are so important to absorb.

Warmest regards

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